

## In brief •

### Fungus on the move

■ For the first time bayoud, a devastating and much feared disease in palm trees caused by *Fusarium oxysporum f. sp. albedinis* has cropped up in Tagant in central Mauritania. The fungus has hitherto only occurred in the zones of origin in Morocco and Algeria, where it severely affects date palms. So far it has destroyed two-thirds of the date palms in Morocco. A redeeming feature of the killer fungus is that different strains are being used successfully in the biological control of striga in cereals in West Africa.

### World market prices hit coffee farmers

■ Prices for coffee have dropped dramatically from 0.95 \$US in September 2000 to 0.49 \$US/lb in March 2001. According to the Association of Coffee Producing Countries (ACPC), excessive availability of low-grade material, production increases and high stocks are the main causes. Although in 2000, ACPC called on its members to retain 20% of their coffee exports for 2 years, prices kept falling and commodity export earnings for countries like Uganda might be halved.

### Traditional medicine by modern means

■ Interested in traditional veterinary medicine? Visit the web-based database on the subject, facilitated by Prélude (Programme for Research and Link between Universities for Development), a network of researchers around the world. The database contains an extensive list of plants, their scientific as well as local names, geographic occurrence and the diseases they cure or ease. A separate database contains pictures of the plants.

Website: <http://pe4.sisc.ucl.ac.be/prelude/>  
Sommaire, ang. /fr.

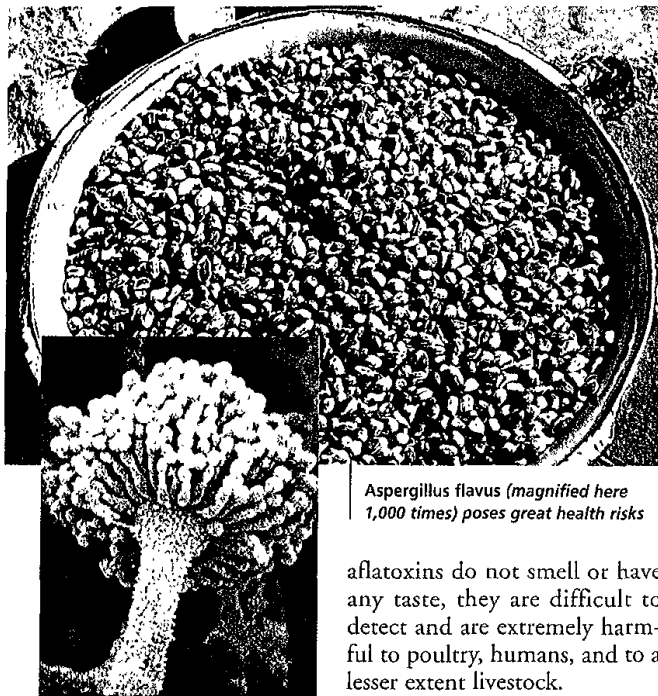
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Email: [lehmann@fynu.ucl.ac.be](mailto:lehmann@fynu.ucl.ac.be)

### The ways of women

■ An international conference 'Governance, expertise and participation: territories and fragile, vulnerable communities. Gender knowledge and sustainable development' will be organised by the University of Cheikh Anta Diop, Prélude and ENDA-TM, in Dakar, Senegal from 20 to 25 January 2002.

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## Not too dry, not too wet



*Aspergillus flavus* (magnified here 1,000 times) poses great health risks

aflatoxins do not smell or have any taste, they are difficult to detect and are extremely harmful to poultry, humans, and to a lesser extent livestock.

Various media reports on high levels of aflatoxins in various foodstuffs have again fuelled the ongoing attention to these compounds which are known for causing cancer. They are produced by certain moulds, notably *Aspergillus flavus*, a fungus found in the soil. It thrives under hot, humid conditions and as a general rule attacks crops under drought stress such as groundnuts, maize, sorghum and chili peppers. It is also found in stored grains and even processed products like peanut butter or vegetable oils. Since

In April 2001, high levels of aflatoxins were found in the peanut butter which a South African nutrition programme provided to schoolchildren. A recent study by Ragaa El Hadi Omer in Sudan has shown that poorly stored groundnuts in the country contain twenty times more aflatoxins than the levels permitted by the World Health Organisation (WHO). For those people who do not manufacture a certain enzyme – in Sudan, half the population – or who have had hepatitis, the aflatoxins are even more than fifteen times more

likely to lead to liver cancer. The problem is aggravated by the fact that most farmers process lower quality groundnuts into groundnut butter for home consumption.

In the early 1990s, as part of the trade bans which led to the collapse of much groundnut production in West Africa, many countries in Europe and elsewhere imposed strict permissible limits of aflatoxin levels. These ranged from zero detectable aflatoxin to around a standard of 10 parts per billion (micrograms per kilogram) for human consumption, of which 5 parts per billion may be the most dangerous type: aflatoxin B1. Various methods exist to detect the toxin in foods, but these are too expensive for smallholder farmers. Prevention measures offer a better solution, such as preventing drought stress in maize and sorghum, and considering irrigation during pollination. Preventing drought stress in pre-harvest groundnuts will prevent cracks in the shells which allow *Aspergillus* to enter. On the other hand, prevention of humid conditions in stored grains and groundnuts and avoidance of feeding bad quality grains and groundnuts to animals, especially poultry, is also recommended.

Mycotoxins in grain  
CTA, GASGA, 1997. 12 pp.  
CTA number 812. 5 credit points

## Stevia – sweet opportunity

■ The Stevia (*Stevia rebaudiana*) plant is fast winning a place in the market for sugar-substitute sweeteners in North America, Europe and Japan. A native of Paraguay, it is grown traditionally in South Africa, Madagascar and China. Its medicinal values for diabetes, digestive aid and lowering blood pressure are also well-known.

A flurry of media coverage in early 2001 could mean an even brighter future for this stubby plant. Traditional producers are considering extending cultivation as a partial replacement for sugar-cane, and countries as far

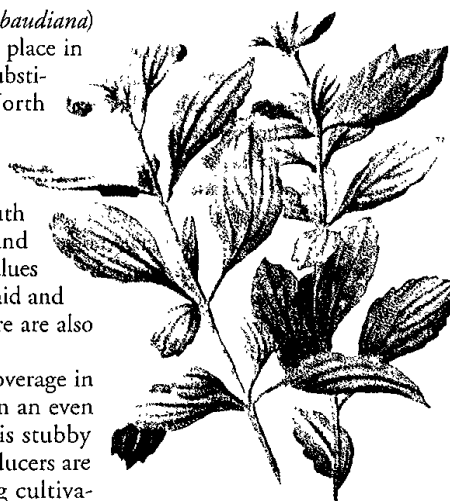


Illustration © GUAYAPI

asfield as Canada, Mexico, Pakistan, Brazil and Iran are looking seriously at its potential. As well as growing as an annual in temperate climes, it grows prolifically as a perennial in warm marshy, highland areas, making it suitable for a good number of ACP countries.

Some importing countries only allow it as a 'dietary supplement', and not a 'food additive'. But a sweetener it is, and there is surely room enough to grab part of the market – as well as using it at home.

For an address list of growers, suppliers and processors, write to the editorial team of Spore at Médiateurs (see page 15)

Website: [www.rain-tree.com/stevia.htm](http://www.rain-tree.com/stevia.htm)